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ABSTRACT

A study examined the possible sources for story ideas within a local television newsroom, with a special emphasis on the role of the reporter. Fifteen newscasts, comprising 227 stories that appeared on early evening newscasts of the three network affiliated television stations in Memphis, Tennessee, were coded for the original source for each story idea. A questionnaire distributed to all reporters and news managers at the three stations probed various attitudes and skills behind the generation of story ideas. Return rate was 74%. Results indicated that while 84% of the reporters and news managers said reporters should be responsible for their own story ideas on a daily basis, the bulk of the story ideas were generated by such middle management employees as the assignment editor or executive producer, with the assignment editor shouldering the largest share. (Three tables of data are included, and 24 footnotes are attached.) (RS)

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ABSTRACT

Wickham, Kathleen Woodruff. The Generation of Story Ideas: An Exploratory Study of Gatekeeping in Local Television News.

This gatekeeping study was an attempt to identify all possible sources for story ideas within a local television newsroom with a special emphasis on the role of the reporter. All possible sources for story ideas were quantified and identified. Included were both internal sources such as reporters and news managers, and external sources such as the daily newspaper, publicity releases and police contacts.

The method included a content analysis of 15 early evening newscasts aired on the three network-affiliated television stations in Memphis, Tenn. Stories were coded for the original source for each story idea. News managers at each station assisted in coding the gatekeeping sections. Coded were 15 newscasts with 227 stories, not including sports or weather.

A questionnaire distributed to all reporters and news managers at the three stations probed various attitudes and skills towards the generation of story ideas. A return rate of 74 percent occurred (55.3 percent from reporters or reporter-anchors and 44.7 percent from news managers).

The study determined that while 84 percent of the reporters and news managers said reporters should be responsible for their own story ideas on a daily basis very

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few made the effort. No difference was noted between beat reporters and general assignment reporters in the generation of story ideas.

Of the 227 stories coded, the bulk of story ideas were generated by such middle management employees as the assignment editor or executive producer. The assignment editor shouldered the largest share.

The study explored some of the differences between the reporters and news managers stated views and what actually occurred during the Fall 1986 study period.

The Generation of Story Ideas:
An Exploratory Study of Gatekeeping in Local Television News

by

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An Exploratory Study of Gatekeeping in Local Television News: Sources for Story Ideas

Local television news, once viewed as the poor stepchild of network news, has become a powerful force in the media marketplace. For that reason, it is important to know something about the gatekeeping process within a local television newsroom and how various participants in the process contribute to the end product, the local news show.

This exploratory study was an attempt to determine the origin of all story ideas within three local network-affiliated television newsrooms.The results have merit in that there are no published studies which attempted to quantify and identify all the sources for story ideas within a television newsroom.

Identifying the origin of all story ideas is a basic part of explaining the medium to a public which increasingly relies on local television news as its primary news source.

Specific attention was paid to the roles of reporters and anchors in the generation of story ideas because a contradiction appeared to exist between the job

responsibilities of a newspaper reporter and the job responsibilities of local television reporters. This difference was noted by the researcher during an informal observation of a local television station in Spring 1984.

As a newspaper reporter, the researcher was expected to develop, on a daily basis, all her own story ideas. But during the informal observation, it appeared to the researcher that television reporters relied heavily on the assignment desk for almost all story assignments and initiated almost no story assignments on their own.

This same observation was made by Bantz, McCorkle, and Baade[1] in their 1980 participant-observation study of a local television newsroom. The three researchers found television reporters "seldom" suggested a story idea. No quantified data accompanied their study. Their study centered around a management model. Fico[2] and Drew[3] also found television reporters' on-the-job performances were limited by the medium's production demands, rather than reporter initiative.

An additional search of the literature found no studies which looked at the gatekeeping role of the television news gatherer. Such an examination was recommended by Bass[4] in his analysis of the news flow process at the United Nations Radio and Visual News Desk. Buckalew[5] also touched on the issue in his examination of radio news sources. Yet, while these two studies came closest to the goals of this study, they involved radio, not television.

The literature review also revealed an absence of studies focusing on all possible gates within a television newsroom. The available published studies focused more on the types of stories chosen according to such criteria as location and conflict than on the sources of news.

This study attempted to eliminate those omissions.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses were based, for the most part, on White's[6] definition of a gatekeeper as any person within a newsroom who makes news choices, Bass's[7] recommendation calling for evaluations of the news flow process according to "news gathering" and "news processing" functions, Gieber's[8] theory that evaluations of the news media should originate within "the walls of the newsroom," Breed's[9] studies indicating newspeople function according to institutional demands, and Buckalew's[10] radio newsroom gatekeeping study.

Buckalew's study provided the only statistical guide for a broadcast gatekeeping study. He determined 24 percent of the radio news stories aired were generated by reporters with the remainder coming from a variety of other sources. The figure, however, only serves as a benchmark. It is not an absolute standard.

A statement by Gieber served as a rudder throughout the study: "Interest in the gatekeeping study is founded on what

at first blush seems to be an utterly simple notion: news is what newspapermen make it."[11]

The same can be said about television newsmen and the purpose of this study. News is what television journalists decide is news. These are the hypotheses which explored the concept of who determines what is news within the confines of a local broadcast news station.

Hypothesis 1: Local television reporters are active participants in the news gathering process. They are responsible for at least 24 percent of the reporter produced stories which appear on the air.[12]

Hypothesis 2: Local television reporters assigned to specific beats are more likely to generate story ideas than general assignment reporters.

Hypothesis 3: A majority of the local story ideas which ended up being aired are generated by news managers and not local reporters.

Methodology

A composite week's sample of newscasts for each of the three-network affiliated stations in a major Southern city were recorded on videocassettes during September and October 1986. Each story was coded for content, source of the story idea and locality as well as the on-air presence of reporters by the researcher.

A news manager at each station assisted in the coding relating to the gatekeeping categories.[13] The categories were adapted from general news content classifications developed in previous research.[14]

The tapes consisted of 15 different newscasts with 227 news stories totalling approximately 12 hours and 30 minutes of news content, including sports and weather. Sports and weather, however, were not part of the study and were not included in the story total. Two of the stations aired hour-long newscasts each evening. The third station aired 30 minutes of local news during the early evening news period.

Subsequently, in November and December 1986, all reporters, producers, and news managers at the three stations were asked to complete a questionnaire which probed their attitudes toward the gatekeeping process, job responsibilities, philosophies of news coverage, and backgrounds.

Three mailings were made. A return rate of 74 percent was recorded on the basis of 38 returns from 51 distributed questionnaires. The study group consisted of 21 staff members, 55.3 percent; and 17 news managers, 44.7 percent. Included were three news directors, three executive producers, four assignment editors, seven producers, one full-time anchor, eight reporter-anchors, and 12 reporters.

The questionnaire was based on previous research which looked at the roles and decision-making attitudes of both television and print journalists.[15] Because the questionnaire

relied on previously published questions no pre-test was attempted. Frequency, chi-square and t-test analysis was completed as appropriate.

The journalists were similar in terms of sex, educational levels, and experience compared to national samples developed by Weaver and Wilhoit in The American Journalist[16] and Vernon Stone[17] for the Radio-Television News Directors Association.

Of the 38 respondents, 23 were male, 57.9 percent, and 15, 39.5 percent, were female, putting the Southern journalists slightly ahead of the national average of 33 percent female employment in television news. Female news managers in the city totaled 24 percent, compared to 10 percent in the national sample.

The largest majority of respondents, 60.5 percent, had a bachelor's degree in journalism, radio-television, or communications, about the same percent found nationally. Advance degrees were either held or being sought by seven respondents, 18.5 percent.

Almost one-third, 31.6 percent, had between six and 10 years experience in television; 23.7 percent had between 11 and 15 years experience; 18.4 percent had between three and five years experience; 15.8 percent had between one and two years experience, and 10.5 percent, had more than 16 years experience.

Findings

The data generated by this study indicates television reporters were responsible for 22.5 percent of the stories which ended up on the air, thus not supporting H_1 which said reporters were responsible for at least 24 percent of the story ideas which appeared on the air.

H_1 used Buckalew's 24 percent figure for radio news reporters[18] only as a benchmark to measure reporter participation in the television gatekeeping process in the absence of any other published guide. While the 22.5 percent figure reads close to the 24 percent mark, in reality, individual reporters generated only a handful of the story ideas which ended up being aired as seen in Table 1.

Because 84 percent of all questionnaire respondents said reporters should generate their own story ideas and so few actually generated any story ideas more research is needed in this area.

In addition, little difference was noted between general assignment and beat reporters (H_2). The hypothesis theorized beat reporters would be responsible for more story ideas but the percentage of ideas was almost evenly split with beat reporters responsible for 10.6 percent of the story ideas and general assignment reporters, 11.9 percent.[19] See Table 2.

This study determined most news story ideas were generated by news managers. However, H_3 was not supported in that the hypothesis called for the majority of the news story

TABLE 1

REPORTERS' SOURCES OF STORY IDEAS

Reporter Code Number	Should Rely On News Managers	Actual Sources of Local Reporter Stories: News Managers		Beat Reporter		General Assignment		Blank[2]	
		%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
1	yes	50.0	(1)	-	-	-	-	50.0	(1)
7	yes	100.0	(1)	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	yes	100.0	(5)	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	no	-	-	100.0	(4)	-	-	-	-
3	no	40.0	(2)	20.0	(1)	-	-	40.0	(2)
4	no	75.0	(3)	-	-	-	-	25.0	(1)
5	no	80.0	(4)	-	-	-	-	20.0	(1)
6	no	66.6	(2)	-	-	33.3	(1)	-	-
8	no	100.0	(3)	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	no	50.0	(3)	50.0	(3)	-	-	-	-
11	no	100.0	(4)	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	no	20.0	(1)	40.0	(2)	20.0	(1)	20.0	(1)
13	no	12.5	(1)	25.0	(2)	62.5	(5)	-	-
14	no	100.0	(1)	-	-	-	-	-	-
15	no	25.0	(1)	-	-	50.0	(2)	25.0	(1)
16	no	16.7	(1)	-	-	83.3	(5)	-	-
17	no	16.1	(1)	16.7	(1)	66.7	(4)	-	-
99[1]	unknown	82.6	(19)	4.3	(1)	13.0	(3)	-	-

[1]Code "99" local reporter/no questionnaire completed.
[2]Stories coded on "non-person" chart.

ideas to be generated by news managers. News managers, including the news director, executive producer, and assignment editor accounted for less than half, or 43.5 percent, of the stories coded on the "Person" chart. Assignment editors were responsible for the largest percentage, 23.3 percent. See Table 2.

Worthy of noting is that on the "Non-Person" chart, network feeds made up the largest percentage, 15.9 percent, and local newspapers, often suspected as being the source for many a local television story, accounted for 2.6 percent. See Table 3.

Discussion

While this study focused on the role of the reporter in the gatekeeping process, the role of a television reporter is not an isolated one. The reporter operates in concert with the expectations and demands of news managers, the institutional limitations of television journalism, and his own background, attitudes, and skills.

The reporter's role in the generation of story ideas was selected as a primary focus because it appeared that, unlike newspaper reporters who are expected to develop most of their own story ideas, television reporters were passive recipients of story assignments from upper level news managers.

Yet what was puzzling in reviewing the data was the fact that while an overwelming majority of news managers,

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY OF STORY IDEAS ON THE "PERSON" CHART

Person Sources	%	(n)
News directors	5.3	(12)
Executive producers	12.3	(28)
Assignment editors	23.3	(53)
Producers	2.6	(6)
Beat reporters	10.6	(2)
General reporters	11.9	(2)
Blank (coded on "Non-person)	33.9	(77)
	100.0	(227)

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TABLE 3

FREQUENCY OF STORY IDEAS ON THE "NON-PERSON" CHART

Non-person Sources	%	(n)
Area newspaper	2.6	(6)
National periodicals	.4	(1)
Press release	8.8	(20)
Wire service	13.7	(31)
Network feed	15.9	(36)
Telephone contacts	5.7	(13)
Police checks/scanner	3.1	(7)
Sales/management	.4	(1)
Blank (coded on "Person")	49.3	(112)
	100.0	(227)

reporters and reporter-anchors said reporters should generate their own story ideas, so few actually did it. Thus, a wide rift exists between attitide and practice.

Those who said television reporters should rely on news managers for story ideas did not generate any story ideas. However, the vast majority of the television journalists, both reporters and news managers, said reporters should not rely on news managers for story ideas. And when the statistics from the study period were analyzed it became apparent the vast majority of reporters do rely on news managers for most of their story ideas. Those reporters who tended to generate story ideas usually generated most of their own ideas but when considered in the aggregrate their contribution was small. This should be explored further.

In addition, it was hypothesized beat reporters would be more inclined to generate story ideas than general assignment reporters, but that fact did not hold true.

Borrowing from Buckalew's[20] study of radio newsmen, it was hypothesized reporters would generate 24 percent of the story ideas broadcast during the study period. Buckalew determined that in large radio markets beat reporters accounted for 8 percent of the story ideas while 16 percent were generated by general assignment reporters. This study found the television reporters responsible for 22.5 percent of the stories aired with beat reporters responsible for 10.6 percent of that figure and general assignment reporters the remainder.

While little difference was noted between beat and general assignment television reporters, the fact their percentage of the total was closer together than in Buckalew's radio study indicates television beat reporters in Memphis are as aggressive as their general assignment counterparts and perhaps more aggressive than their radio beat reporters.

This study also raised questions about Gieber's[21] and Bass'[22] emphasis on the news gatherer role, at least in television. It appeared from the data television reporters are passive recipients of story ideas from news managers in that those in the study generated 22.5 percent of the story ideas compared to the news managers' 43.5 percent. At the same time, the fact only 5.3 percent of the news story ideas were generated by news directors indicated news directors left most decisions regarding story assignments and coverage to middle management employees like the assignment editor and executive producer.

While it could be argued it is the assignment editor's job to keep on top of news events, and thus it would be logical for that slot to have a high percentage, it should be noted that the reporters in the field, especially those covering beats, should also have a significant number of sources for story ideas. Such disparities could be attributed to internal newsroom operations which may encourage or discourage reporters from generating their own story ideas and the supervisory style of the different news managers.

It would also seem logical to expect local reporters--working for a local broadcast outlet covering local news--to generate a higher percentage of news stories than illustrated by this study. While no ideal figure has been determined by previous researchers, the fact so few television reporters took affirmative actions to generate their own stories is curious in itself. Further research is recommended. The lack of strong reporter involvement in the generation of story ideas is also puzzling considering the high percentage of local news stories aired on local television newscasts.

The answer may lie in the reporters' views of the purpose of their jobs more than in anything else.

Bantz et al[23], in comparing newsroom operations to the routinization of a factory assembly line, concluded that when such differences occur it is because the newsroom lacks flexibility and newswork is evaluated by news managers according to productivity, not originality. The researcher's own observations bear this out in that, in at least one of the newsrooms studied, the day's story line-up was prepared before the reporters walked in the door in the morning. A tightly controlled organizational structure would tend to discourage reporters from making proposals for story ideas because of the detailed shifting of personnel needed to accomodate story ideas not already scheduled for that day.

To Kirkpatrick[24] such poor internal communication systems play a large role in the internal operations of an

institution and may account for real or preceived differences in performance levels and expectations.

Thus, it could be concluded that reporters who are not encouraged, or required, to do more than the minimum amount of work are not going to do so. They will find it easier, and more acceptable to their peers and superiors, to rely on news managers for story assignments than to generate their own.

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[1]Charles R. Bantz, Suzanne McCorkle, and Roberta C. Baade, "The News Factory," Communication Research 7 (January 1980):45-68.

[2]Frederick Fico, "Statehouse Broadcast and Print Reporters: A Comparative Analysis," Journal of Broadcasting 28 (Fall 1984):477-483.

[3]Dan G. Drew, "Roles and Decision Making of Three Television Beat Reporters," Journal of Broadcasting 16 (Spring 1972):165-173.

[4]Abraham Z. Bass, "Refining the 'Gatekeeper' Concept: A UN Radio Case Study," Journalism Quarterly 46 (Spring 1969):69-72.

[5]James K. Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper and His Sources," Journalism Quarterly 51 (Winter 1974):602-606.

[6]White, "The 'Gatekeeper.'"

[7]Bass, "Refining the 'Gatekeeper' Concept."

[8]Walter Gieber, "News is What Newspapermen Make It," ed. Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White, People, Society and Mass Communications. (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), p. 173-181.

[9]Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," Social Forces 33 (May 1955):326-335.

[10]James K. Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper and His Sources," Journalism Quarterly 51 (Winter 1974): 602-606.

[11]Gieber, "News is What Newspapermen Make It," p. 173.

[12]Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper."

[13]A two-chart approached was used in coding the data. Stories could be coded either on a "Person" chart or a "Non-person" chart. The "Person" chart. included the news director, executive producer, assignment editor, other producers, beat reporters, and general assignment reporters. The "Non-person" chart included area newspapers, national periodicals, press releases, wire service, network feed, telephone contacts, police checks/scanner, and sales/management categories. A story could be coded on both charts, but it could be coded only once on each chart. Thus a story generated by a reporter who received a press release and turned it into a story could have been coded twice. Each chart included a "blank" section for stories which were coded exclusively on the other chart.

[14]See William C. Adams, "Local Public Affairs Content of TV News," Journalism Quarterly 55 (Winter 1978):691-695 and "Local Television News Coverage and the Central City," Journal of Broadcasting 24 (Spring 1980):253-265; James K. Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper and His Sources," Journalism Quarterly 51 (Winter 1974):602-606; and K. Tim Wulfemeyer, "A Content Analysis of Local Television Newscasts: Answering the Critics," Journal of Broadcasting 26 (Winter 1982):481-486.

[15]Dan G. Drew, "Roles and Decision Making of Three Television Beat Reporters," Journal of Broadcasting 16 (Spring 1972):165-173; Robert V. Hudson, "A Descriptive Study of Oregon TV Newsmen," Journalism Quarterly 44 (Spring 1967):136-137; Karl A. Idsvoog and James L. Hoyt, "Professionalism and Performance of Television Journalists," Journal of Broadcasting 21 (Winter 1977):97-109; Ted Joseph, "Television Reporters' and Managers' Preferences on Decision-Making," Journalism Quarterly 59 (Spring 1967):476-479, and Donald S. Weinthal and Garrett O'Keefe, "Professionalism Among Broadcast Newsmen In An Urban Area," Journal of Broadcasting 18 (Spring 1974):193-209.

[16]David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, The American Journalist: A Portrait of U. S. News People and Their Work (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[17]Vernon Stone, "Women Gain, Black Men Lose Ground in Newsrooms," Communicator, Radio-Television News Directors Association (August 1987):9-11.

[18]Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper."

[19]Ibid. Buckalew had determined in this study that beat reporters accounted for 8 percent of the stories aired, while general assignment reporters accounted for 16 percent.

[20]Buckalew, "The Radio News Gatekeeper."

[21]Gieber, "News is What Newspapermen Make It."

[22]Bass, "Refining the 'Gatekeeper' Concept."

[23]Bantz et al, "The News Factory."

[24]Walter, J. Kirkpatrick, "Harrah's Communication Needs Assessment Survey," Kirkpatrick Associates, unpublished report (April 1987).